

**INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN LITERATURES  
READING LIST**

**Compiled by Mary D. Holmström**  
(Updated in February 2025)

**LEILA ABOULELA (Sudan)**

The first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing

**THE TRANSLATOR.** The novel is a sensitive portrayal of love and faith. Sammar, a young Sudanese widow living in Scotland grieves the loss of her husband. Only when she begins working as an Arabic translator at a university in Aberdeen does she discover that love is a possibility again. Among her other novels are *The Kindness of Enemies*, *Minaret*, *River Spirit*, and her short story collection, *Elsewhere Home*.

**CHINUA ACHEBE (Nigeria)**

**THINGS FALL APART.** This classic novel, the most beloved and widely read of all African novels, tells the tragic story of the hero Okonkwo and his village Umuofia at the end of the 19th century and the dramatic changes that are ushered in with the arrival of European missionaries and colonialists. Achebe's other novels are *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe is known as the "father of contemporary African literature in English."

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (Nigeria)**

**HALF OF A YELLOW SUN.** Hailed as "the 21st-century daughter of Chinua Achebe," Adichie re-creates an important moment in modern African history: Biafra's impassioned struggle to establish an independent republic in Nigeria in the 1960s. Other works include her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus*, *We Should All Be Feminists*, *Americanah*, and *Deam Count*.

**AMA ATA AIDOO (Ghana)**

**CHANGES: A LOVE STORY.** Esi, a beautiful, well-educated woman who seems to have everything, is dissatisfied with her life in modern-day Accra. The changes that come into her life - divorce and remarriage as the second wife of a polygamist husband - are more than she bargains for. Aidoo is also a poet, playwright, and short story writer.

**AYI KWEI ARMAH (Ghana)**

**THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN.** A railway freight clerk in Ghana tries to hold out against the pressures both in his family and his country which impel him towards corruption. Armah's other novels include *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Blest* and *Two Thousand Seasons*.

**MARIAMA BÂ (Senegal)**

**SO LONG A LETTER.** An intense, beautiful novel in the form of a letter written by Ramatoulaye to her friend, Aissatou, this work is a cry of protest against the practice of polygamy in Islamic Senegalese society.

**NOVIOLET BULAWAYO (Zimbabwe)**

**WE NEED NEW NAMES.** Ten-year-old Darling grows up in a shantytown in Zimbabwe until she escapes to live with her aunt in the U.S.A. The novel is a potent story of displacement and arrival told in a voice that is utterly distinctive and original.

**J. M. COETZEE (South Africa)**

Winner the Booker Prize in 1983 and 1999 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003

**DISGRACE.** The novel is set in post-apartheid South Africa. An incident of unimaginable terror and violence forces David Lurie and his daughter to confront their strained relationship – and the equally complicated racial complexities of the new South Africa. Among Coetzee’s other novels are *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*.

**TEJU COLE (Nigeria)**

**EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF.** This spare, precise novel is a haunting meditation on a man’s return to Nigeria. The unnamed narrator slowly begins to reconcile the profound changes that have taken place in his country and in himself. Cole’s other works include his novels, *Open City* and *Tremors*, and several collections of essays, among them *Known and Strange Things* and *Blind Spot*.

**TSITSI DANGAREMBGA (Zimbabwe)**

**NERVOUS CONDITIONS.** This is both a moving story of a girl's coming of age and a compelling narrative of the human loss involved in the colonization of one culture by another. *Nervous Conditions* was named by the BBC in 2018 as one of the top 100 books that have shaped the world. Other notable works are her novel *This Mournable Body* and her essay collection, *Black and Female*.

**BIRAGO DIOP (Senegal)**

**TALES OF AMADOU KOUMBA.** Originally told to Diop by his family’s griot (traditional storyteller/oral historian), these brilliant tales compare with the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine.

**DAVID DIOP (France/Senegal)**

Winner of the International Booker Prize in 2021

**AT NIGHT ALL BLOOD IS BLACK.** A hypnotic, heartbreaking tale of a Senegalese soldier’s mind descending into madness, shattered by grief and the horror of the First World War. Diop’s latest novel is *Beyond the Door of No Return*.

**ASSIA DJEBAR (Algeria)**

**FANTASIA: AN ALGERIAN CAVALCADE.** The novel intertwines the history of Algeria with episodes from the life of a young girl stretching from the French conquest in 1830 to the War of Liberation in the 1950s. Djebbar also wrote the equally compelling *A Sister to Scheherazade*.

**BUCHI EMECHETA (Nigeria)**

**THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD.** This novel poses many questions about marriage and the position of women in Nigerian society. The main character Nnu-Ego devotes her life to her children, but she does *not* experience much joy in the process. Among Emecheta’s other novels are *The Slave Girl*, *The Bride Price*, and *Kehinde*.

**OLAUDAH EQUIANO (Nigeria)**

**EQUIANO’S TRAVELS: THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO OR GUSTAVUS VASSA THE AFRICAN.** Published in 1789, this is Equiano’s own account of his life. Captured by slave traders at the age of ten, he was taken to the southern states of America and later to the West Indies. At the age of twenty-one, he bought his freedom, sailed on various naval expeditions, and became an ardent member of the Anti-Slavery Movement. His autobiography is a work of great literary and historical importance.

**NURUDDIN FARAH (Somalia)**

Winner of the 1998 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, the first African writer to win the prize **SWEET AND SOUR MILK, SARDINES, and CLOSE SESAME (VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF AN AFRICAN DICTATORSHIP)**. Beautifully written and constructed, the novels

comprising Farah's trilogy inform readers of what it was like to live under the intolerable pressures of Somali President Mohammed Siad Barre's tyrannical regime from 1969-1991.

**AMINATTA FORNA (Sierra Leone)**

**ANCESTOR STONES.** A sweeping portrayal of the lives of five Sierra Leonean women. The women's triumphs and tragedies are played out within a society in transition over the better part of a century: colonialism, independence, and the horrors of civil war – and their brave attempts to alter their destiny.

**DAMON GALGUT (South Africa)**

Winner of the Booker Prize in 2021

**THE PROMISE.** A family saga about the Swart family who are haunted by an unmet promise made to the Black woman who has worked for them her whole life. Reunited by four funerals over three decades, the dwindling family reflects the atmosphere of South Africa – one of resentment, renewal, and, ultimately, hope.

**NADINE GORDIMER (South Africa)**

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991

**CRIMES OF CONSCIENCE.** This powerful collection of short stories reveals Nadine Gordimer's outstanding ability to pierce the core of the human condition of those, both Black and white, living under apartheid in South Africa. She has published many volumes of short stories as well as novels, among them *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, *July's People*, and *My Son's Story*.

**ABDULRASAK GURNAH (Tanzania)**

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021

**AFTERLIVES.** Set in colonial-era German East Africa, it tells the stories of three protagonists in an unnamed coastal town in the early 1900s, a period when virtually all the continent belonged to Europeans. The novel is an exploration of imperialism and war, but it is equally a love story. Among Gurnah's many other acclaimed novels are *Paradise, By the Sea*, and *Desertion*.

**YAA GYASI (Ghana)**

**HOMEGOING.** The novel illuminates the troubled legacy of slavery through the lives of two half-sisters born in the Gold Coast (now present-day Ghana) in the 18th century and eight generations of their descendants, who travel from the West Coast of Africa to the plantations of Mississippi, from the American Civil War to Jazz Age Harlem.

**BESSIE HEAD (South Africa and Botswana)**

**THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES.** These short stories focus on the position of women in Africa. Bessie Head's novels are *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru*, and *A Question of Power*.

**CHEIKH HAMIDOU KANE (Senegal)**

**AMBIGUOUS ADVENTURE.** Sambo Diallo finds his situation is ambiguous: while he has become estranged from the Muslim faith of his people in Senegal, he is unable to identify with the soulless material civilization he finds in France where he is sent to learn the secrets of the white man's power.

**JOMO KENYATTA (Kenya)**

**FACING MOUNT KENYA.** Jomo Kenyatta, first president of independent Kenya from 1963 to 1978, studied anthropology at the University of London in England and wrote this seminal book about Gikuyu culture in 1938. This classic work helped build the case for Kenyan human rights and freedom and inspired the imaginative writing of such writers as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

**CAMARA LAYE (Guinea)**

**THE AFRICAN CHILD** (first published in French as *L'Enfant Noir* and sometimes published in English as *The Dark Child*). This memoir of Laye's childhood in his home village in Guinea has become a well-loved classic. Laye also wrote *The Radiance of the King*, *A Dream of Africa*, and *The Guardian of the Word*, a version of the Sundiata epic related to the author by the famous Malian griot Babu Condé.

**NAGUIB MAHFOUZ (Egypt)**

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, the first writer in Arabic to be awarded the prize **THE CAIRO TRILOGY (PALACE WALK, PALACE OF DESIRE, and SUGAR STREET)**. The trilogy follows the life of the Cairene patriarch Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad and his family across three generations, from 1919, the year of the Egyptian Revolution against the British colonizers ruling Egypt, to 1944 near the end of the Second World War. Among his other acclaimed novels are *Children of Gebelaawi*, *Midaq Alley*, and *The Beginning and the End*.

**JAMAL MAHJOUR (Sudan)**

**NAVIGATION OF A RAINMAKER**. Mahjoub's debut novel follows the journey of a young man from a mixed family who travels from Britain to Sudan to claim his heritage from his father. As famine inexorably moves into the western part of the country, Tanner find himself the embodiment of the same malaise gripping the country. Among his many other novels are *Wings of Dust*, *In the Hour of Signs*, and *The Fugitives*.

**IMBOLO MBUE (Cameroon)**

**BEHOLD THE DREAMERS**. A novel about class divisions and pursuing the American Dream through the eyes of two families: the Jongas, immigrants from Cameroon, and the Edwards, an American executive at Lehman Brothers and his wife, and how the financial crisis affects the lives and dreams of both families.

**ZAKES MDA (South Africa)**

**WAYS OF DYING**. Toloki is a “professional mourner” who attends funerals in the townships around Johannesburg to comfort grieving families of the victims of the city's crime, racial hatred, and crippling poverty. The novel provides a brutal, magical, funny, and painful picture of South Africa today. Among Mda's works are his acclaimed novel *The Heart of Redness* and *Sometimes There Is a Void: Memoirs of an Outsider*, a disarmingly candid account of his life.

**DINAW MENGESTU (Ethiopia)**

**THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS**. This deeply-felt novel is about the hidden lives of immigrants – the trauma of exile, the loneliness and despair, and the search for acceptance, peace, and identity. His other novels are *How to Read the Air*, *Someone Like Us*, and *All Our Names*.

**MAAZA MENGISTE (Ethiopia)**

Short-listed for the 2020 Booker Prize

**THE SHADOW KING**. This remarkable novel is about Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 at the start of World War II and focuses on the experience of the Ethiopian women who played a vital role in winning the war. The author also sheds light on the experiences of the Italian soldiers and the exiled king, Haile Selassie.

**ES'KIA MPHAHLELE (South Africa)**

**DOWN SECOND AVENUE**. Both an autobiographical novel and a social commentary on a childhood in the crowded back streets of a ghetto area in Pretoria, South Africa, this work is a brilliant

contribution to the new genre of autobiography as a vehicle of protest. He has also written short stories, novels, memoirs, and literary criticism.

**MEJA MWANGI (Kenya)**

**STRIVING FOR THE WIND.** Set in Kenya, this novel is a hilarious, yet subtly disturbing, portrayal of post-colonial decadence. Other notable novels are *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road*.

**NGUGI WA THIONG'O (Kenya)**

**WEEP NOT, CHILD.** This is probably the best-known novel from East Africa. It is set before and during the Kenyan people's struggle for independence from Britain in the 1950s - the uprising known as Mau Mau, or, more correctly, the Land and Freedom Movement. Ngugi's other important novels include *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*. Ngugi is also a playwright and a powerful essayist and social and political critic - *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, Culture and Politics*; and *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*.

**D. T. NIANE (Mali)**

**SUNDIATA: AN EPIC OF OLD MALI.** The great epic story of Sundiata, founder and hero of the Mandingo (Mali) empire in the 13th century, has been preserved and passed down through the ages by griots, West Africa's hereditary oral historians and storytellers. D. T. Niane recorded this version of the Sundiata epic from the griot Mamadou Kouyaté and has written it in the form of an historical novel.

**CHIGOZIE OBIOMA (Nigeria)**

**THE FISHERMEN.** Set in the small Nigerian town of Akure in the mid-1990s, *The Fishermen* is the Cain and Abel-esque story of four brothers who encounter a madman whose mystic prophecy of violence threatens the core of their close-knit family.

**NNEDI OKORAFOR (Nigeria)**

Winner of the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature, the Hugo, Nebula, and the World Fantasy Award  
**DEATH OF THE AUTHOR.** This spellbinding Africanfuturist novel traces a Nigerian American woman's quest for freedom and self-invention despite the social and cultural conventions that try to contain her. Other works are *Zahra the Windseeker*, *She Who Knows*, and *Shadow Speakers*.

**BEN OKRI (Nigeria)**

Winner of the Booker Prize in 1991

**THE FAMISHED ROAD.** Set in the Nigeria of his early years, Ben Okri tells the colorful and evocative story of a magical child, an *abiku* with mischievous links to the spirit world, who leads his parents into unrest and danger.

**OMOLOLA IJEOMA OGUNYEMI (Nigeria)**

**JOLLOF RICE AND OTHER REVOLUTIONS: A NOVEL IN INTERLOCKING STORIES.** Nonso, Remi, Aisha, and Solape, students at an all-girls boarding school, forge an unbreakable sisterhood that is strengthened during a school rebellion, which has long-lasting repercussions for all of them. In adulthood they deal with the possibilities, limitations, and uncertainties of life within and outside Nigeria. The novel moves between Nigeria and the United States, illuminating the challenges that accomplished Nigerian women face and the risks they take to control their destinies.

**FERDINAND OYONO (Cameroon)**

**HOUSEBOY.** Written in the form of a diary, this novel describes Toundi Joseph's experiences as a steward in the household of a French District Commissioner in Cameroon and his wife. It presents a critical and satirical view of colonial administrators and Christian missionaries.

**ALIFA RIFAAT (Egypt)**

**DISTANT VIEW OF A MINARET AND OTHER STORIES.** In her short stories Alifa Rifaat lifts the veil on what it means to be a woman living within a traditional Muslim society. Her writing articulates a subtle revolt against, and a sympathetic insight into, the place of women in the essentially male-dominated Islamic environment.

**TAYEB SALIH (Sudan)**

**SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH.** This novel is both a powerful and a poetic examination of the mental anguish and psychic torment that are the consequences of the colonial contact between North and South. He also wrote *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*.

**OUSMANE SEMBÈNE (Senegal)**

**GOD'S BITS OF WOOD.** In 1947-1948 the workers on the Dakar-Niger railway came out on strike. Sembène, in this vivid, timeless novel, evinces all the color, passion, and tragedy of those formative years in the history of West Africa. Other works include *Black Docker*, *Xala*, and *Tribal Scars and Other Stories*. Sembène is also known as "the father of African cinema."

**LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR (Senegal)**

**LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR: SELECTED POEMS.** Senghor was a poet, professor, philosopher, and statesman who became the first president of Senegal when it gained independence from France in 1960. He served as president of Senegal until 1980. He was the chief theoretician of *négritude*, or "blackness," his definition for the common culture and spiritual heritage of the black peoples of Africa. His poems still resonate today.

**WOLE SOYINKA (Nigeria)**

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, the first African writer to win the prize  
**DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN.** This remarkable play tells how a well-meaning British District Officer tries to prevent the ritual suicide of a Yoruba chief - a sacrificial suicide demanded by the death of the king - and the devastating repercussions which follow. Among his other plays are *The Lion and the Jewel*, *Kongi's Harvest*, and *Madmen and Specialists*. In *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, Soyinke wrote the story of his boyhood, before and during World War II. Wole Soyinka is also a brilliant poet, novelist, essayist, literary critic, and theatre director.

**MIRIAM TLALI (South Africa)**

**MURIEL AT METROPOLITAN.** Banned when it was first published in South Africa, this novel describes the daily experiences of Muriel, a Black accounts-typist who works in a bustling furniture and electronics store catering for poor whites and Blacks. The novel's wit, humor, social commentary, and wealth of detail reveal the paradoxes, absurdities, and injustices of the apartheid world.

**AMOS TUTUOLA (Nigeria)**

**THE PALM-WINE DRINKARD.** This adventurous and folkloristic tale draws heavily on the Yoruba oral tradition. It describes the main character's journey into "Deads' Town," a never-never land of magic, ghosts and demons, unknown creatures, and supernatural beings. Other works include *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *Feather Woman of the Jungle*.

**BINYAVANGA WAINAINA (Kenya)**

Winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002

**HOW TO WRITE ABOUT AFRICA.** Binyavanga Wainaina was an essayist, memoirist, editor, publisher, agitator and activist. This collection includes his essays, travel writing, short stories, dispatches, and satirical lampoons that cover post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s to Kenya and abroad. His best-known essay, “How to Write About Africa,” is a scathing critique of the tropes and clichés that many Western writers rely on to write about Africa. It became one of the most influential pieces of satire in the 2000s. He also published a memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*.